

SPOTLIGHT



JEFF CALHOUN,
61, is the American
director behind
Dolly Parton's
West End hit
musical 9 to 5

INTERVIEW BY JACK KELLY

You started out as an actor. Was there a "big break" moment in your transition to director and choreographer?

I owe a lot to the famous American actor and director Tommy Tune who took me under his wing as a teenager. He allowed me to act as his replacement in his show *My One And Only* (1983) and then go on to direct and choreograph it on the West Coast. I made a career recreating his show at regional and dinner theatres as well as at AIDS benefits. Unfortunately, the AIDS crisis was in full bloom at that time and it sounds terrible to say but my directing career did develop by putting together very high profile benefits. I feel somewhat guilty about that but it is really where I cut my teeth and it was a great way to raise money.

You work with deaf actors through a company called Deaf West Theatre. Any challenges?

Well, firstly, all the hearing actors had to learn all of their dialogue and lyrics in sign language and then perform it as they sing and talk, and the deaf

actors had to learn how to stay with music that they can't hear, so they built-in visual cues. But at least in this format, a deaf audience doesn't have to look at an interpreter on the side of the stage and miss the whole show, they can watch and understand the musical as if they're hearing it. My new show will have a deaf protagonist and is an adaptation of *Cyrano de Bergerac* where instead of having a big nose, Cyrano is deaf. I thought the irony of the deaf actor putting the words into another hearing actor's mouth was very compelling.

You've directed multiple theatre shows for Disney such as *High School Musical on Stage!* (2007) and *Newsies* (2017). Who can't get enough of who in this relationship?

I'm always next to the phone if they're interested. There's nothing better than working for Disney. I remember talking to Tom Schumacher, the president of Disney Theatrical and saying "Come on, I've given you two hits!" And he said, "Jeff, listen, be grateful, you're the only director we've

ever hired twice". And I hadn't thought about that, so I'm honoured but certainly hope there's a third and fourth sometime in the future. A friend of mine Kenny Ortega actually coincidentally directed the films *High School Musical* and *Newsies*, so if he keeps his movie career going, hopefully, I can keep my stage!

Although your musical 9 to 5 is very upbeat, it also has a message around female solidarity in the face of workplace misery. Is this still a hot issue in today's theatre world?

Ever heard of Harvey Weinstein? I think it's as prevalent now as it ever was, it's just not in the shadows anymore. So I guess I'm thrilled we now have a place where we can actually laugh at it a bit while still making the point. And that's what the show tries to do and we have an amazing cast to achieve this.

You're on the board of directors for Covenant House, a housing and supportive service for youth homelessness. Why do you care?

I was fortunate enough to have come from a beautifully loving family and just to see people that are challenged at a young age breaks my heart. Covenant House is about support and tries to be the helium for these kids that are facing homelessness, as soon as I walked through their doors something changed for me. At the same time, I was doing *Newsies*, in which a bunch of kids who are virtually homeless are living on the street. It's interesting that it all came together at the same time in my life.

If you had the option to one day wake up and have your life be like a musical, would you take it?

Wow. You have the honour of really asking a question I've never been asked. You know what? It depends what musical it would be. If it was *Diana*, no. If it was *Hamilton* or *Hello Dolly*, yes – but that is a really interesting idea for a musical ...

9 to 5 is showing in Sydney from February 16; Brisbane from May 22; Melbourne from July 2022.



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Jeffrey Smart, *The plastic tube*, 1980, private collection, courtesy Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert, Sydney © The Estate of Jeffrey Smart

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